

MDA Unplugged

The power and necessity of federal partnership to Maritime Domain Awareness.

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In his 1791 letter of instructions to the commanding officers of the Revenue Cutters, the historical genesis of today's Coast Guard, Alexander Hamilton advised that the "cutters may be rendered an instrument of useful information concerning the coast, inlets, bays and rivers of the United States, and it will be particularly acceptable if the officers improve the opportunities they have in making such observations and experiments in respect to the objects...reporting the result from time to time to the Treasury." Even then, the value of maritime awareness and information sharing were evident. In this century, maritime awareness has evolved into a *sine qua non* of not only our national security, but global stability. Its importance has grown but so has the challenge, as the use and reliance of the world's oceans has never been greater.

Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) will be primarily powered by partnerships rather than by any single technology or capability. Certainly, building a system of persistent maritime awareness requires new capabilities in a domain historically guided by visual aids, freedom of navigation, and limited sovereignty. But the unavoidable truth is that partnerships and not procurements will be the cornerstone of Maritime

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Maritime Domain Awareness Overview



Domain Awareness. Partnerships will build trust and that trust will build capability. Cooperation and not competition is the key to our collective success.

The challenge of Maritime Domain Awareness and the need for a system that supports secure efficiency makes the case for partnership all the more compelling and necessary. The multifaceted nature of maritime threats requires scenario-based partnerships as much as planning or capabilities.

The 360-Degree Challenge

Maritime Domain Awareness is not solely a linear problem that starts overseas and follows an orderly event chain across the Atlantic or Pacific toward the United States. People, vessels, and cargo transiting the world's oceans present potential threats, but they are certainly not the only ones. Small recreational vessels can pose just as significant a threat, and perhaps a more achievable one for those who wish to do us harm. Which is more likely:


- a terrorist cell infiltrating or forcibly taking over a large oceangoing vessel crewed by professionally licensed mariners;
- or a cell heading down to any local port community and renting a recreational vessel, the only requirement for which is a major credit card?

Both scenarios are plausible threats. They also represent the spectrum of the Maritime Domain Awareness challenge. Each requires unique types of information to provide the effective understanding that defines MDA. Expanding capabilities to detect, watch, and identify large oceangoing vessels entering or transit-

ing U.S. waters will do little to improve our awareness of the millions of recreational vessels plying U.S. waters every single day. The threats are unique and multifaceted and so must be our solutions. Domestic, international, interagency, and industry cooperation are all critical parts of the solution.

Secure Efficiency

MDA is in the interest of the maritime community. Most importantly, it enables maritime forces to exercise an appropriate and nonlethal response. As government agencies work to enhance Maritime Domain Awareness, Hamilton provides another useful guidepost in his admonition that Revenue Cutter commanders “will always keep in mind that their countrymen are freemen, and, as such, are impatient of everything that bears the least mark of a domineering spirit. They will, therefore, refrain, with the most guarded circumspection, from whatever has the semblance of haughtiness, rudeness, or insult.” While the sensitivities may be different, the principle is just as important today as it was in the eighteenth century. The U.S. cannot erect a fence around our maritime borders.



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The U.S. is strengthened by a globalized and interconnected world but it is not secured by it. The essential challenge is to ensure the latter without sacrificing the former.

With so much of the U.S. economy dependent on maritime trade, and so much of that trade run by private entities, Maritime Domain Awareness cannot be achieved without a full partnership between industry and government. A secure maritime domain is vital to our homeland security and an efficient maritime domain is vital to our economic prosperity and security. The two concepts are not, and cannot be, mutually exclusive. In all we do, the concepts of security and economic efficiency must be viewed as complementary and not competing interests.

Scenario-Based Partnerships

For the Coast Guard, the necessity for partnership is not new. In one of the earliest comprehensive statements of modern Coast Guard doctrine, titled “Headquarters Circular No. 126” (16 October 1936), Coast Guard officers were charged to “keep in close contact with the senior officials of all bureaus, agencies, services, and other activities of the Government for which the Coast Guard performs duty...Conferences between Coast Guard representatives and the local officials for those activities will be held sufficiently to assure that the Coast Guard is cooperating in so far as practicable to their satisfaction in the enforcement of the laws administered by them.”

The Coast Guard has always been a small service with a big job in a vast domain, so partnerships were essential to mission success. With its thousand ship navy concept, the U.S. Navy has embraced the concept of global partnership in pursuit of maritime safety and security.

But partnerships to what end and with whom? Both the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Navy have done a great deal of work assessing the threats and overall risk of a wide variety of maritime attack scenarios. The entirety of these scenarios addresses the 360-degree nature of the maritime threat. Collective efforts to build capability to address these scenario risks must start with partnerships. Partnership priorities for federal agencies should be based upon specific risk scenarios and established to address specific threats, vulnerabilities, or consequences of a maritime incident.

Some of these will come in a variety of forms, from bilateral country-to-country agreements to broad multilateral or regional agreements. Others will be interagency or industry partnerships. But, the starting point should be a specific risk scenario. Military services are quite adept at building capabilities to counter specific threats or deliver precise effects. Maritime Domain Awareness depends on the Coast Guard and Navy using partnerships, in all their forms, as instruments of positive risk influence.

About the author:

LCDR Matt White has served 12 years in the U.S. Coast Guard, including six years afloat. He has also served in staff assignments for the Office of Congressional Affairs and the Office of Budget and Programs. He is a 1994 graduate of the Coast Guard Academy and a 2003 graduate of the JFK School of Government at Harvard University.